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Hello, CIA? I'd like to critique your headquarters, please.

How an architecture critic set out to evaluate the CIA building in Virginia, encountered certain difficulties, but was able to conclude it's a good (not a great) place to park your cloak and dagger.

● There may be a lot of interesting characters roaming (or lurking?) around the CIA headquarters near Washington, but don't ask Tribune architecture critic Paul Gapp. He didn't get close enough to any of them to find out when he visited the building to report on its design merits (p. 18). In fact, he saw little enough of the structure itself during a tour that was carefully—very carefully—planned and monitored. Still, he saw enough to make some interesting observations: "The CIA has no internal fire brigade and very little firefighting apparatus, other than hand extinguishers. That means outside fire departments must come in," says Gapp, "which may be a major security risk." And: "They even advertise bowling leagues on their bulletin boards. But what does it say on the backs of their bowling shirts?"

By Paul Gapp

The critic drove his borrowed Buick out of Washington, across a bridge spanning the Potomac River, and onto the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Virginia. It was a day of brilliant blue sky, warm sun, and dazzling fall foliage—a perfect day, the critic thought, to visit the headquarters building of the Central Intelligence Agency some six miles from downtown Washington.

Finding the main entrance to the 219-acre, rolling, wooded site on which the CIA building stands is neither difficult nor easy. The CIA seems to have planned it that way (this was the first of many assumptions the critic would have to make in the absence of official candor) to discourage the casual curious from turning up at the gate. A cunningly vague juxtaposition of highway turnoffs and understated directional signs does the trick.

The critic's mission was clear enough: To write about the CIA building *as architecture*, not as symbol, nest of spies, or repository of exquisitely dark secrets. No one, it appeared, had done this before. And until the Buick arrived at its destination, the mission had seemed fairly routine.

A week earlier, the critic had begun by talking to Max Abramovitz, a partner in the New York architecture firm that designed the building in 1961. Chicago-reared Abramovitz is a solid old pro who studied architecture at the University of Illinois and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, taught for a while, then went into partnership with Wallace K. Harrison. Among the firm's best-known structures is the giant Assembly Hall at Abramovitz's alma mater in Champaign.

"You know, we don't have anything in our files on the CIA building," the architect said for openers. "We turned everything over to the CIA under the terms of our original agreement. The renderings, the working drawings — every scrap of paper."

The critic began asking questions. Abramovitz, an affable man, tried to be helpful. "As on any job, we started designing the building with a small, elite crew who came up with the preliminary conceptualizations, how to solve the general problems and that sort of thing. Four or five of us had top-secret clearance."

And the rest of the Harrison & Abramovitz personnel?

So how did the building ever get built?

"The CIA had its own people, its own [illegible] personnel with other skills, to finish the job."

Its *own* people? What did that mean?

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Where did the CIA *get* those people? Abramovitz's answers were beginning to raise dozens of tantalizing new questions to which he could not possibly respond without breaking security. The critic politely backed off. This was, after all, the most secrecy-shrouded structure in the United States, if you discounted those command-post caverns under unknown mountains from which World War III might be fought.

The bizarre edge of the conversation with Abramovitz had dulled by the time the Buick rolled up to the guardhouse just inside the fence around the CIA compound. The critic did not know that his professional dispassion would be dented again shortly after the uniformed guard at the gate made an identity check, then waved him through.

Inside the compound, the CIA road curved a bit to the left for about half a mile, and then, through the trees, the headquarters building came into view. This first glimpse would have been unremarkable except that only one human being was in sight, standing in front of a huge structure where thousands are employed (the number, of course, is kept secret).

It was a federal holiday, and only a skeleton force (25? 100? 500?) was inside the building. That was how the critic had arranged his visit. Even journalists are forbidden entry on workdays because they might recognize an agent as a next-door neighbor who passes himself off as an insurance salesman.

The solitary figure stepped forward as the visitor pulled the Buick up to the curb, cut the engine, got out, and locked the door (Chicago habits die hard). The man was no tour guide, no public affairs employe. He was plainclothes Security. He helped protect the building. It seemed fair to conclude that despite the warmth of Security's handshake, he had instantly sized up the critic's musculature and vulnerabilities and perhaps even selected a method of armed or unarmed disablement from his limitless and unspeakable repertoire.

Suddenly, the critic's dispassion began crumbling under the weight of remembered movies, novels, and news reports about the CIA. Was not Security forced to assume that the critic might not be a critic at all? But this kind of thinking was silly, wasn't it? No, not at all, because now Security was speaking into a tiny walkie-talkie: "This is Unit 65. We are proceeding along the south front and will be in this area for approximately 10 minutes." Back came a crackling reply from some control center deep inside the building: "All right, Unit 65, this is Victor and 10-4." Victor, it developed, would know precisely where we were at all times. These people were very serious.

Architectural criticism becomes complicated when the architect can't talk, the client won't talk, there are no drawings to look at, and one is permitted to see only the exterior and limited interior areas of a building. But on with the assessment:

The logic of the $54-million building's spatial sequences seems obvious. Clearly, the CIA wanted separation by degrees of secrecy as well as function. So what it got was five interconnected six-story towers rising from a two-story base structure. Where an employe is allowed to go in the building is strictly controlled, except for those with top clearance. The design makes this easy.

Facades of the reinforced concrete structure present themselves as simple grids, but with enough detailing to relieve the tedium of straight boxiness. Exposed aggregate panels frame each window for textured relief. Window lines on the bottom and top stories of the towers are set back to provide narrow strip balconies, which nobody ever uses.

Harrison & Ambramovitz gave the base building a slightly undulating, soft-cornered, almost free-form look. This sculptured feeling is echoed, albeit less adroitly, in a large, free-standing, concrete portico that defines the main entrance and shelters VIPs arriving in their limousines.

The architects got their only chance to show off a bit in designing a low-security, 1,400-seat cafeteria that is really a separate structure spliced onto the rear of the main building and thus simple to seal off. Its soaring, triple-arched roof, high ceiling, and large expanses of glass make it a cheery place for desk-bound employes taking a noon break. The structural detailing on the exterior is rather heavy-handed, however, and on balance it comes off as an uninspired engineering exercise.

Two auxiliary buildings lie near the main structure. One is a spherical, white-tile-roofed affair that resembles a half-buried radar dome. It turns out to be a 500-seat auditorium where the CIA can make presentations to outsiders without their passing through secret areas. A tunnel links the sphere with headquarters. The other structure is a rectangular, nondescript box housing an ultrasecret CIA printing plant. There, one assumes, it is possible to produce anything from a Russian passport to an honorable discharge from the Chinese navy. Also nearby is a fenced-in building with a sign proclaiming it to be a Bureau of Public Roads facility. This may or may not be true. (While the critic was taking notes on these observations, Security was remaining in radio contact with Victor, who was still seemingly unconvinced that the critic was a pure-blooded patriot.)

Now it was time to enter CIA headquarters, with its 1.4 million square feet of floor space, about half that of Chicago's John Hancock Center. It is in its interior that the CIA building falls apart esthetically. This is no fault of the architect, but of unknown people who made the decisions.

There were two ways to go in embellishing the ground-floor interior spaces through which virtually every CIA employe must pass. The first was a straight corporate look, which would have been in keeping with the rest of The building: it does remind you of a big business complex out in exurbia, after all, and not for nothing do they call it the Company. The second way to go was ceremonial, symbolic — the old Federal Dignified style.

The CIA opted for the latter, but they blew it. In the marble-sheathed lobby and in the broad, 200-foot-long hallways that run around the perimeter of a landscaped courtyard, there is plenty of space for proclaiming the agency's identity and mission, and the CIA tried to make the most of it. But its effort fell flat.

The first thing you see on the lobby wall is the graven biblical inscription "And Ye Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make Ye Free." A bit farther along is an enlarged photocopy of a letter George Washington wrote about the importance of intelligence. On still another wall is a row of photographs of the Presidents who have served since the CIA was founded, along with their testimonial letters on why the agency is vital to the nation. Collectively, however, all of this comes across as an apologia, not as the proud declaration it was intended to be.

The same must be said about the other exhibits and adornments in the entry areas: a bas relief of Allen Dulles, the CIA's seal and flag, medals of valor given to agency heroes, 35 stars representing agents who have died in the line of duty, and a row of embarrassingly poor oil portraits of past CIA directors. These things have been put together with little style, flair, or sense of good design. The CIA deserves better.

Other interior spaces are commonplace and fairly typical of federal office structures. Few areas are carpeted, and the decor is rather spartan. The same pecking order used by corporations determines whether one's office boasts so luxurious a furnishing as a couch. Of the sophisticated electronic and heaven-knows-what-else gadgetry beeping away behind locked doors, little can be said, for it is off limits to all but a select few.

Later, after examining his notes, the critic would decide that considering the constraints it faced, Harrison & Abramovitz did more than a workmanlike job. The building functions well. It is nicely wedded to its idyllic rural site, and good design has reduced its visual massiveness to a minimum. Parking lots for more than 3,000 cars are intelligently sited and invisible to anyone approaching the main entrance. CIA headquarters is not great architecture, but it is respectable architecture and superior to many other federal buildings constructed in and around Washington since World War II.

But now it was time to leave, and as

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the critic indulged in a farewell handshake with Security, he made a parting remark about the ranks of powerful floodlights pointed at the building's exterior. "Of course, their function is obvious," said Security. "But you know, sir, when we have a heavy snowfall out here, and those lights are on at night, and everything is quiet — well I just can't find the words to tell you how pretty it is."

Security, his mastery of the martial arts notwithstanding, turned out to be a human being, even though he did talk to Victor again as the visitor began pulling away in the Buick.

In the 90 seconds it took to drive to the exit gate, more unanswerable questions rushed to mind. What extraordinary measures did the CIA take to prevent someone from tapping its phones, eavesdropping through its walls by microwave, poisoning its water supply, knocking out its electrical power, or penetrating the building via its sewer lines — to cite only a few hypothetical risks. Who solved these architectural-engineering problems, and how?

Finally, how much did Security, Victor, and all the rest of those people know about the critic before he ever arrived to make the tour?

"You'll be filed away in the memory of a CIA computer for life," a fellow journalist told the critic in Washington that night. He was smiling when he said it, but he was probably right. ■

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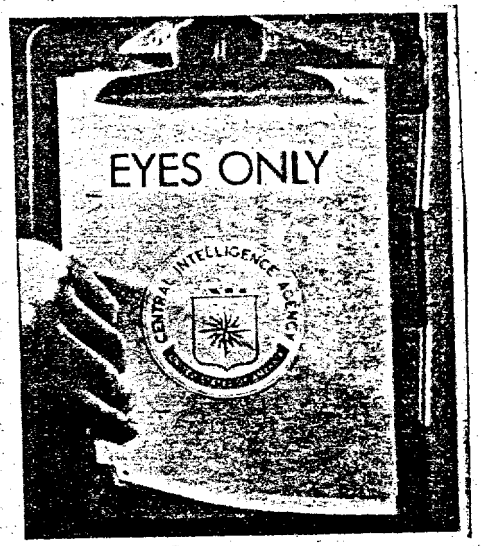

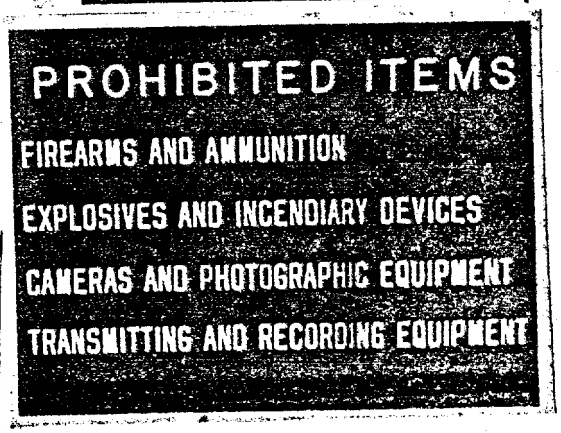

The CIA complex in Virginia, wherein can be found clear-plastic wastebaskets marked "burn," triple-locked compartments, and various other signs that the inhabitants don't fool around when it comes to security.

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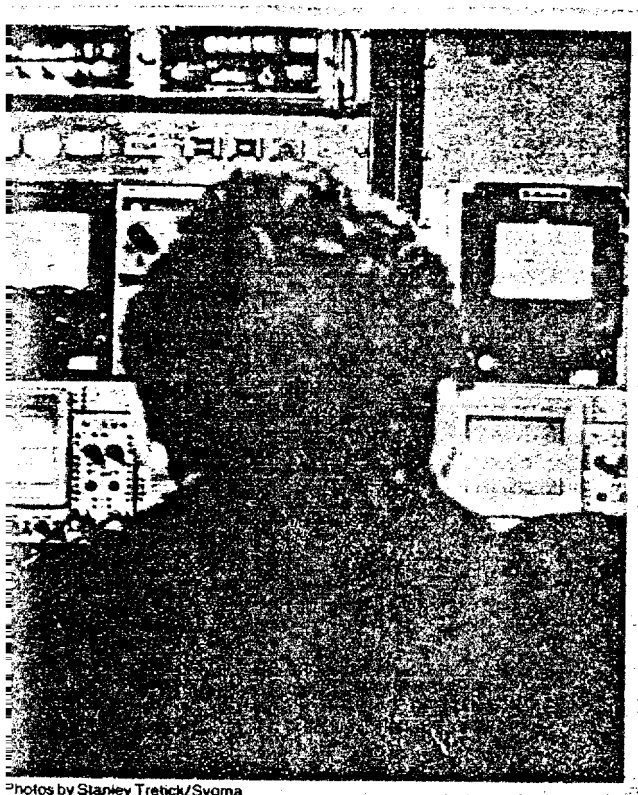
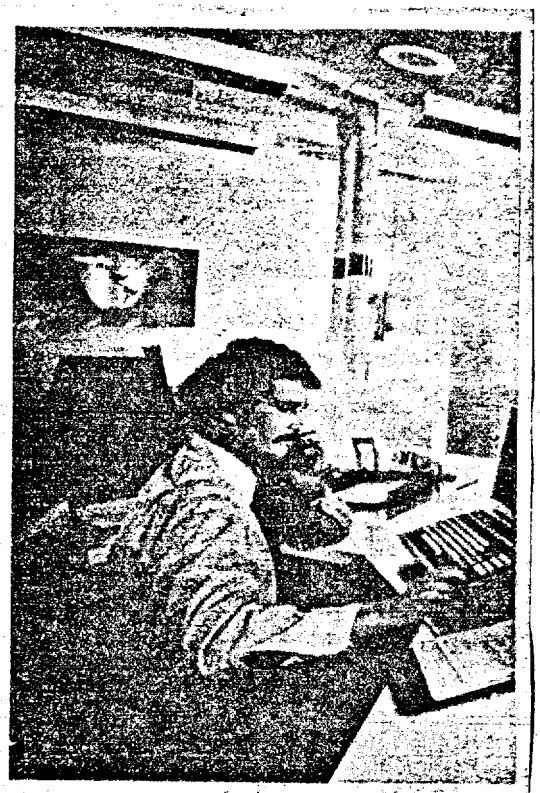
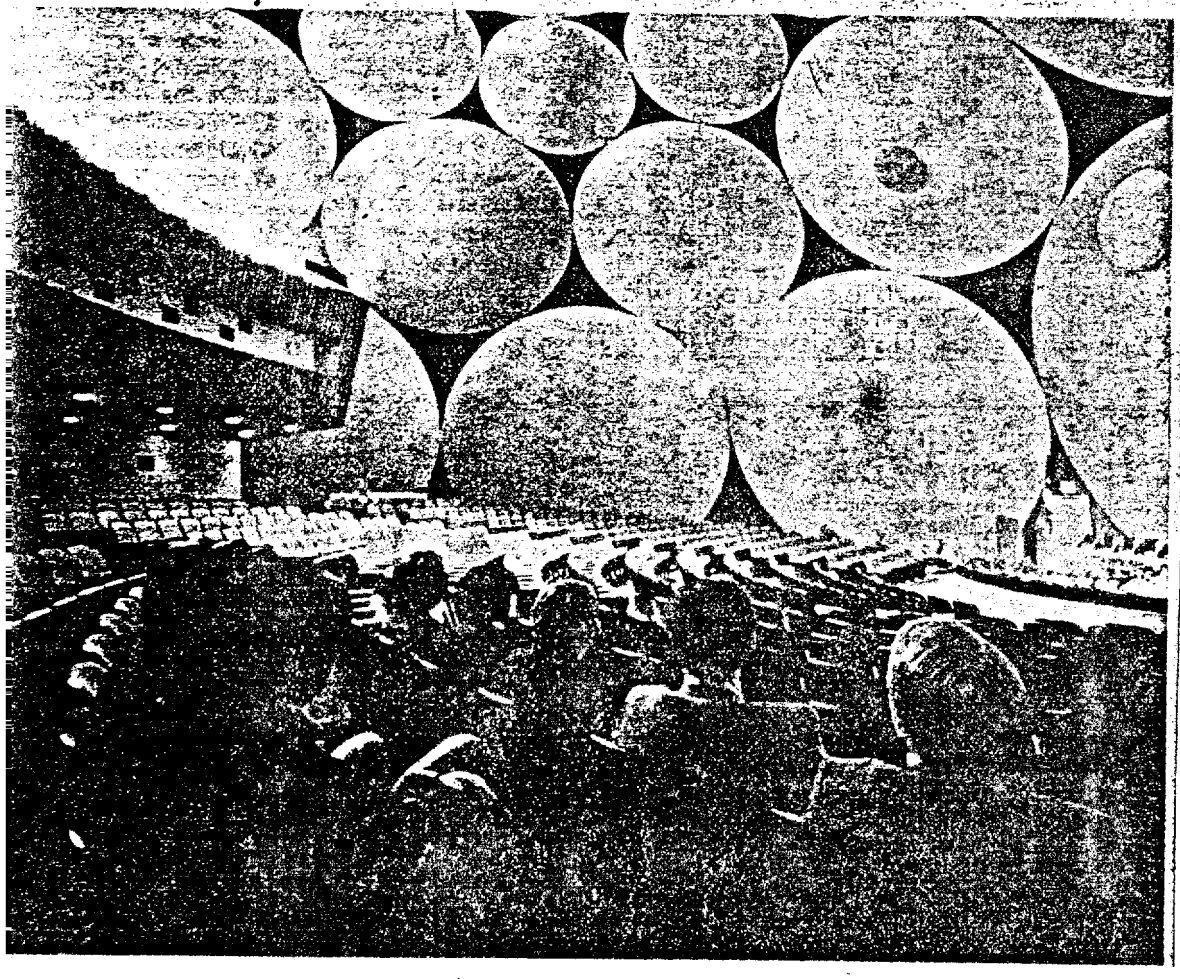




Photos by Stanley Tretick/Sygma



Above left: Inside the CIA building, an employe undertakes an analysis of Russian radar signals.

Above: Workers in the operations center at CIA headquarters. The center is a gathering point for data transmitted from agents in the field.

Left: The interior of the dome-shaped auditorium near the headquarters building.

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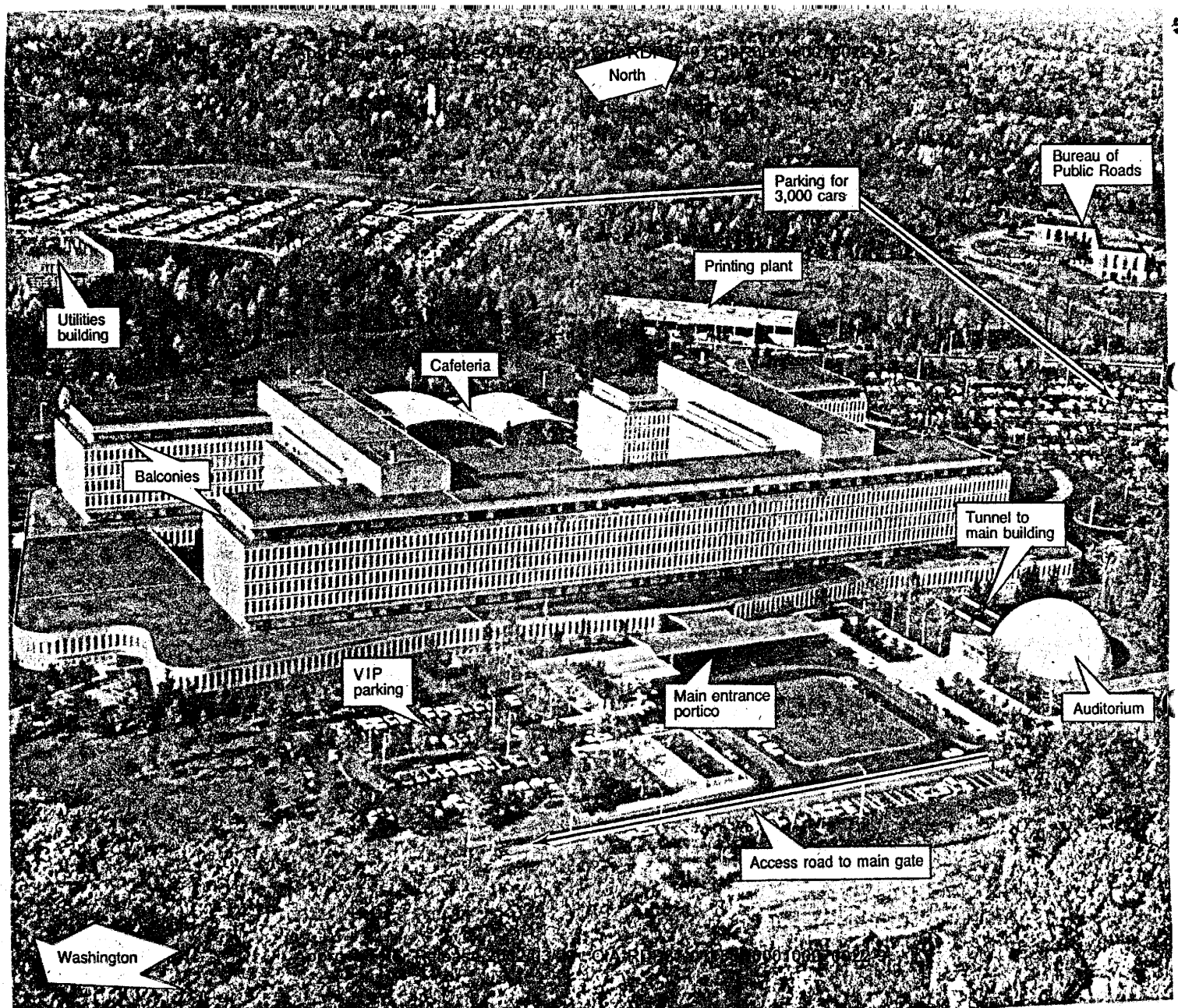
North
Bureau of Public Roads
Parking for 3,000 cars
Printing plant
Utilities building
Cafeteria
Balconies
Tunnel to main building
VIP parking
Main entrance portico
Auditorium
Access road to main gate
Washington